

# THE POWER OF PERSISTENCE

In a world of instant gratification, working on the same project for three or seven years or even longer can be challenging for some, while others simply get it done. What makes people stay the course? **Cherice Smith** found out.



Whether it is working on a PhD, an MBA or a long-term project in the workplace, one thing is critical: having the staying power to push through even though the end-goal may seem very far away.

Staying power is extremely important when tackling any long-term project, says Willem Conradie, a registered psychologist with extensive experience in psychometric assessment, learning and development and managing director of a niche human resource development consultancy.

“People who are involved in projects that stretch over a long period of time constantly need to deliver high-performance outputs, despite early setbacks, continuous pressure, budget cuts, scope creep and other obstacles. Therefore, endurance and stamina become all the more critical to remain focused on the task at hand.”

But how do some get it right while others don't? Some people seemingly just have more stamina than others, says Conradie.

“David Grier, the extreme adventurer who attempted to run the Great Wall of China a couple of years ago, is a good

example. He and his running partner ran a marathon almost every day for 98 days in temperatures exceeding 40°C.

“For other people, to learn or to enhance their ability to endure and build stamina, self-awareness is critical. People should know their strengths and leverage them in every situation. At the same time, people should be aware of their limitations or weaknesses in order to compensate for them.”

**‘Certain sacrifices need to be made to reach the goals that have been set. Therefore, self-discipline needs to be applied if and when necessary.’**

Conradie says emotional intelligence, a popular concept in recent years, can also play a role.

“People with well-developed or well-enhanced emotional intelligence skills are often more successful than others and seemingly cope better with environmental demands and stressors. Well-developed reality testing skills and a positive outlook

on life play a major role. A recognised emotional intelligence test could provide people with valuable feedback about their emotional intelligence skills.”

Self-discipline and self-regulation are also crucial. “Certain sacrifices need to be made to reach the goals that have been set. Therefore, self-discipline needs to be applied if and when necessary.”

Conradie warns that professionals who embark on long-term projects often need to remind themselves not to take on too much too soon and not to set unrealistic goals.

“Professionals who are in the midst of a long-term project may want to take some time out, to take a step back and re-evaluate their current priorities.”

How do professionals deal with long-term projects?

USB PhD student, Hannelie Kruger, worked on her thesis – entitled *Trademark and brand dilution: an empirical investigation* – for seven years. She recently passed her PhD oral exam and was awarded the Vice-Rector Postdoctoral Fellowship from the Department of Business Management at Stellenbosch University.

She says her staying power to complete her PhD came from her topic that captured both her interest and imagination.



Ernst van Dyk



Hannelie Kruger



Jack van der Merwe



Jana du Plooy



Willem Conradie

“It was my dream to complete a PhD. My older sister is a world-renowned Friesian horse breeder and my younger sister was a cyclist with national colours and is now an extreme sports competitor. My mother completed her third degree at the age of 70. I was raised to be determined and to never give up.”

Kruger, who never took a break from her PhD, says she worked when and wherever she could and as hard as she could.

“I didn't even take a break when I had a child who did not sleep for two and a half years. I have a very supportive husband who took over many of my household chores during the last year of my studies.”

USB MBA student, Jana du Plooy, who started her Modular MBA in 2012, says her staying power comes from her determination.

“There are always reasons to give up – valid ones as well. Staying power is the decision to go on despite those reasons. My two biggest motivators are the amazing people doing the MBA with me and the intellectual stimulation I get from the course.”

Working full-time as a sales manager for the non-profit company Communicare, Du Plooy stays focused by applying her mind to the task at hand.

“Too often, we feel so overwhelmed by everything we have to do that we become paralysed and then do nothing at all. Sometimes, you simply cannot get around to everything. When this happens, you need a support structure. My husband is amazing – he picks up when I drop a ball.”

Jack van der Merwe, CEO of the Gautrain Management Agency, is in charge of Gauteng's 25-year integrated transport master plan (ITMP25) to develop an efficient transport system in Gauteng. He knows all about the ups and

downs of long-term projects. He headed up the Gautrain Rapid Rail project from its early beginnings in 1997.

“This has been a rollercoaster ride where I have had the privilege of interacting with a world-class multi-disciplinary team of professionals in South Africa and abroad. Everyday has been a learning experience. The fact that I was part of a team that has changed the face of Gauteng and that the project has received numerous international awards, is icing on the cake.

“This is a 24-hour job, even when you are on holiday you are thinking about issues and problems. You have to be mentally ‘fit’. If you don't enjoy what you are doing, you will not last a year. Deciding that you want to do the project and completing it to your standards is the reward for all the work, worry and effort.”

Ernst van Dyk, the veteran of six Paralympic Games and a multiple medallist in wheelchair racing and handcycling, approaches every year as a project.

“I grade competitions according to importance and profile. Also, I ensure that I have smaller competitions in between to keep me sharp and to measure progress.”

Van Dyk says that he has come to terms with the fact that it is impossible to be at your best for every event. “A setback is merely seen as stepping stone to improve, innovate or go back to the drawing board. When working on long-term projects planning is key, but to be realistic is even more important. Have the end-goal in sight, but focus on the micro components of the plan and execute each of those with precision and 100% commitment. Never lose sight of where you are heading and understand that setbacks are part of the game and that you only grow through adversity. And, have passion for whatever you embark on.” <sup>a</sup>



## HOW TO SUSTAIN YOUR ENERGY WHEN WORKING ON LONG-TERM PROJECTS

Willem Conradie shares some tips:

- Pace yourself as if you are running a marathon and not a sprint.
- Set milestones along the way and make a point of celebrating small successes.
- Involve those around you and create a support network.
- Take it one day at a time or one challenge upon another challenge.
- “Begin with the end in mind,” like Stephen Covey, American educator, author and businessman, recommended, and stay focused on your end-goal – the reason why you decided to embark on the project.
- Break your long-term goals down into manageable short- and medium-term goals.

COMMENT HERE [www.usb.ac.za/agenda](http://www.usb.ac.za/agenda) or [agenda@usb.ac.za](mailto:agenda@usb.ac.za)